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The Postcard Poetics of Nicanor Parra's *Artefactos*

Rebecca Kosick

In 1972, Chilean poet Nicanor Parra published his latest collection of poetry: a cardboard box containing 242 postcards, entitled *Artefactos* (*Artifacts*). At the time, Parra was well known in Chile for having made an enormous and then-controversial splash in the country's literary scene with his *Poemas y antipoemas* (*Poems and Antipoems*), published almost two decades earlier in 1954. As Chile's famous antipoet, Parra had already forwarded an irreverent, aggressively down-to-earth approach to poetry in the 1954 collection, but the *Artefactos* took Parra's challenge to the norms of poetic production and distribution considerably further. These postcards continued to employ the colloquial, humorous, and at times vulgar language characteristic of the antipoems, but they also incorporated drawings by artist Guillermo Tejeda and, most radically, left behind the codex structure of pages bound together into a single volume. Loose and nonsequential, each postcard's face shows either a drawing alongside a text written by Parra or a facsimile of text written in the poet's own hand. The words themselves are often few, and take the style of slogans, brief ironic commentaries, and what José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois refers to as "poetic jokes."¹ The back of each card (figure 1) looks exactly as a postcard would be expected to look, with horizontal lines where the address would be written, an outline of a square in the upper right corner where the stamp would go, and blank space on the left side for a message yet to be recorded. In the top, centered, are the words "TARJETA POSTAL," and just below them, in a smaller but darker font, their English translation, "POST CARD." In two languages, these cards announce that they don't just look like it—they really are postcards.

1. José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois, *Para leer a Parra* (Santiago de Chile: Aguilar Chilena de Ediciones S.A., 2003), 73.

Figure 1 Nicanor Parra, Reverse of *Artefactos*, 1972.

The postcard as we know it today, with an image on its face, first began circulating in Chile in the late nineteenth century, but it was in the twentieth that it became an important form of correspondence. As a document, it was closely associated with “the everyday, the lived experience of common people” and, unlike other documents that more typically constitute the artifacts of history, postcards represent casual records of interpersonal exchange.² As Karen S. Van Hooft points out, when adapted into poetry, the postcard grants each poem “more individuality than if it were included in a bound volume,” giving the poems “something of the personalized, intimate quality of a written communication between friends.”³ Parra’s use of this form is provocative in light of his well-known preference for poetry that closes the gaps between everyday language, life, and art. And, this essay will argue that the postcard functions for the *Artefactos* not just as a poetic provocation or an experimental alternative to the codex, but as a material realization of Parra’s poetics.

Post-Antipoetry

Scholarship on the collection often emphasizes that the *Artefactos* represent a continuation and concentration of Parra’s established poetics. This would include his rejection of poetry as a high art and his incorporation of everyday language into the language of poetry. Among other features of his poetics, these things are also characteristic of the *Artefactos*, and several texts that would later be included among the postcards appeared in more conventional

2. Samuel León Cáceres et al., *Historia de la postal en Chile* (Valparaíso, Chile: Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, 2007), 11.

3. Karen S. Van Hooft, “The ‘Artefactos’ of Nicanor Parra: The Explosion of the Antipoem,” *Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingüe* 1 (1974): 68.

publications first. In 1967, some of these texts were published by the Venezuelan journal *Imagen*. Two years later, an anthology put out by Casa de las Américas in Cuba included a section dedicated to these early versions.⁴ In both cases, these *Artefactos* were text only. They incorporated no images and made no material reference to the postcards that would eventually be published by the Universidad Católica de Chile.

In addition to their prior appearances as not-postcards, the *Artefactos* have also been compared to Parra's earlier antipoetry. The *Artefactos* maintain many of the features characteristic of collections like *Poemas y antipoemas* and *Obra Gruesa* (generally translated as *Thick Works*) (1969) but also notably condense the longer, more discursive style of these earlier collections. Both writing in 1974, Van Hooft⁵ and Marlene Gottlieb,⁶ identify the increasing brevity of Parra's poetry in the years between the more narrative *Poemas y antipoemas* and the *Artefactos*, whose primary text frequently consisted of only a handful of words. In addition to the *Artefactos'* early appearances without images, Van Hooft also points out that the *Artefactos* borrow from and reconfigure lines from elsewhere in Parra's oeuvre, re-presenting fragments of longer works as new, shorter wholes.⁷ Early accounts of the *Artefactos* emphasize the ways in which this collection, despite its unconventional form, grows from the poet's work not as a counter to prior practice, but as a diverse new complement to it. In using image and text in the

4. Niall Bins and Ignacio Echevarría "Sobre *Artefactos*," in Nicanor Parra, *Obras completas & algo +* (Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores, 2006), 981.

5. Van Hooft, "The 'Artefactos' of Nicanor Parra."

6. Marlene Gottlieb, "Del antipoema al Artefacto al...: La trayectoria poética de Nicanor Parra," *Hispamérica* 2 (1974).

7. Gottlieb likens the *Artefactos* to concrete poetry, which was, in the early 70s, just coming to the end of its midcentury heyday in Latin America, especially Brazil. The *Artefactos*, though, "don't depend on the arrangement of letters on the page alone" as she sees it, but incorporate the visual as "another dimension that the poet adds to the poem" in the way that, "on television, the image reinforces and concretizes what the speaker says." *Ibid.*, 33. This and other translations from the Spanish are my own unless otherwise indicated.

service of an ever more succinct antipoetry, Parra is able to build on the poetic trajectory he established decades before.

One way this happens is via the *Artefactos*' incorporation of images. Parra had used multimedia methods previously, for example in the *Quebrantahuesos* (*Osprey*) (1952), a collaboration Parra participated in with Enrique Lihn and Alejandro Jodorowsky, among others. *Quebrantahuesos* consisted of collages of newspaper clippings that were publicly displayed as broadsides in Santiago. Later in his career, Parra continued to make use of found and borrowed materials in other ways. In the discursive antipoems, for example, the found consisted of the kinds of language the poet would overhear in the public sphere. This language was then filtered through the poet on its way to becoming poetry, or antipoetry. Presaging the *Artefactos*' later incorporation of political speech and slogans, "El peregrino" (from *Poemas y antipoemas*) begins, for example:

Atención, señoras y señores, un momento de atención:

Volved un instante la cabeza hacia este lado de la república,

Olvidad por una noche vuestros asuntos personales,

El placer y el dolor pueden aguardar a la puerta:

Una voz se oye desde este lado de la república.

¡Atención, señoras y señores! ¡un momento de atención!

(Your attention, ladies and gentlemen, your attention for one moment:

Turn your heads for a second to this part of the republic,

Forget for one night you personal affairs,

Pleasure and pain can wait at the door:

There's a voice from this part of the republic.

Your attention, ladies and gentlemen! Your attention for one moment!)"⁸

In this opening stanza, Parra borrows from familiar forms of public address. The poetic voice speaks directly to readers, but in an ironic twist for a poem, asks them to forget the personal, pleasure, and pain. These things are common poetic meditations, but are here subverted to an emphasis on the rhetoric of political pronouncement. While the poem does go on to address the speaker's personal affairs, including pleasure and pain, this first stanza establishes a poetics in which Parra borrows language typically found in other domains and asserts its place in poetry.

In conversation with Leonidas Morales, Parra notes that this found approach to poetics extends to the *Artefactos*, which he envisions as "prefab poems" rather than his own "creations."⁹ In the *Artefactos*, Parra continues to borrow phrases and linguistic registers from non-poetic speech. In this, he maintains a degree of authorial control, acting as the medium by which found language comes to be poetic language. That said, the *Artefactos* introduce new strategies for pre-fabrication and provide new opportunities for eroding the poet's role as sole creator or mediator of what will become the poem. Unlike in the antipoems, Parra was only ever partially responsible for the content of the postcards that, together, made up the *Artefactos*. He supplied the texts, but Tejeda's drawings were done without any oversight whatsoever from Parra. The brief remarks that accompany the postcards,¹⁰ written by editor Cristián Santa María, describe how "all the artist had were Parra's texts. He received no directions and never met the poet until

8. Nicanor Parra, *Antipoems: New and Selected* (New York: New Directions, 1985), 4-5. Translation by W. S. Merwin.

9. Reproduced in Parra, *Obras Completas & Algo +*, 991. This is also a critique of Vicente Huidobro, known for advocating an approach to poetry he called "creationism."

10. These remarks appear in a glossy booklet made of a single folded sheet of paper, printed front and back. The booklet was packaged in the box along with the individual postcards and is the closest the set comes to the codex, with a cover image of Parra, interior commentary by Santa María, and a back cover bearing the collection's copyright information.

after the project had finished.”¹¹ The *Artefactos* thus represent an even greater incorporation of the found or prefab in that their very construction builds on a de facto relinquishment of authorial control over the creative process. This is one way in which the *Artefactos*, while continuing from prior practice, do represent a significant break from established poetic conventions, both Parra’s and others’.

The *Artefactos* cede control to other real and potential collaborators to such a degree that they fundamentally reconfigure the modes by which poetry communicates, reconstituting both writerly and readerly subjectivity such that readers *are* writers and writers are all of us. This becomes evident to readers by way of the collection’s overt invitation to write, address, and mail these postcards, and is constantly thematized throughout the available text and images which emphasize a polyphony of speakers, poetic and not. In this, the *Artefactos* do extend the antipoetic project that Parra describes in his famous poem “Manifiesto” (Manifesto), as one in which “los poetas bajaron del Olimpo” (the poets have come down from Olympus).¹² But, as postcards, they are able to materially realize this goal for the first time, disrupting the divisions between art and life in ways that remained out of reach for the codex-bound poetics that came before.

Post-Book

As a result, the *Artefactos* challenge the relationship between poetry and the history of the book in the late twentieth century. Poetry has always been, and remains, a language-based art that need not necessarily manifest in print, or in the form of a codex. It can be—and many poetry

11. Cristián Santa María, “‘Artefactos’,” in Nicanor Parra, *Artefactos* (Santiago de Chile: Universidad Católica de Chile, 1972), preface.

12. Nicanor Parra, *Emergency Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 118-119. English translation by Miller Williams included in this bilingual edition.

enthusiasts argue that it must be—recited. In the twentieth century, though, its primary means of circulation was the book, even in cases where poetry’s sonority was highly prized. Parra, for example, remarks that “Neruda’s poetry, and *modernismo*¹³ in general, is acoustic, sonorous, it enters through the ear.”¹⁴ Though this might seem paradoxical, even poems like these—ones that exploit the lyric’s traditional relationship with song and sound—materialized as printed text, bound and delivered via the codex. On the other hand, Parra claims that, in the case of the *Artefactos*, poetry “enters through the eye.”¹⁵ This happens thanks to their incorporation of images, the brevity of their textual components, and the visibility of the textual components themselves. The cards employ an enormous variety of fonts and font sizes, display text in visually inventive ways, and combine both printed with handwritten text. As such, these postcards are something to be seen and displayed, artifacts in and of themselves, rather than the material means of delivery for a form that demands to be recited. That said, the challenge the *Artefactos* make to the book is even greater than a shift from sonority to visibility. The collection rejects the codex entirely. Its construction as a box of postcards suggests poetry can circulate differently, and more widely, when it undoes its binding. While a collection of loose cards could still conceptually be thought of as a book, as Gottlieb points out, the collection has a built-in “self-destruct” feature because, “when all of the cards have been mailed, the “book” “disappears.”¹⁶

13. Starting in the late nineteenth century, Latin American *modernismo* does not directly correspond to North American “modernism” which dates to the interwar period in the twentieth century.

14. Juan Andres Piña, *Conversaciones Con La Poesía Chilena* (Santiago de Chile: Pehuén Editores, 1990), 35. Also cited in Parra, *Obras Completas & Algo +*, 997.

15. Ibid.

16. Marlene Gottlieb, “La evolución de la antipoesía: Un siglo, un milenio más tarde,” *Ciberletras* 21 (2009), <http://www.lehman.edu/faculty/guinazu/ciberletras/v21/gottlieb.htm>.

The disappearance of the book in the contemporary moment is most often associated with the rise of digital media. It has become clear by now that the arrival of digital texts does not necessarily mean the era of the book has ended. Even so, the digital landscape has profoundly impacted print culture and most discussions about the disappearance of the book surround the move from paper to e-books and other electronic media.¹⁷ While this path does apply to a great many examples, the *Artefactos* demonstrate another kind of poetic excursion from the codex. The collection remains intimately engaged with another common material home for text—the postcard—which is neither a book nor a digital alternative or adaptation of one. Electronic media is often painted as offering a radical departure from the constraints of print media. This is often true, but at the same time, many digital books overtly display their ties to the codex that preceded them. E-books, for example, often mimic the material construction of the printed book, including by incorporating a cover, a fixed sequence of pages, and even, at times, digitally reproducing the sound and look of a page being flipped. Rather than a cover and binding, the *Artefactos* are held together in a box, just as any set of postcards would be. They have no fixed sequence, and they need not stay together as a set at all. In fact, with one side of each card yet to be composed, leaving the set behind is what allows the *Artefactos* to realize their final form. As such, the codex appears in the collection only as the immaterial trace of the form not chosen, the norm against which the postcards pronounce their poetics.

As I have indicated, this approach allows Parra to realize certain tenets of antipoetry. The postcards bring poetry down from its rarefied position as an elite form and enable an increased proximity between poetic and everyday language. The *Artefactos* manage both of these feats and overcome a divide still in place in earlier manifestations of antipoetry, which, however much it

17. See, for example, chapter 12 in this volume (Edward King).

bucked the norms of what ought to go into a poem, was still poetry and perceived as such. This was due both to its binding to poetry's then-established material support (the codex), and by way of its incorporation of traditional poetic forms and features. As René de Costa describes, "though it reads like prose, [antipoetry] is perceived as poetry thanks to a balance between the fluid syntax of the narrative and the regular rhythm of the phrasing" which employs "perfectly measured quartets in *endecasílabo*¹⁸ that are linked by rhyme."¹⁹

The *Artefactos* are poetry, too, but they are also actually postcards. Many of the texts on these cards are in endecasílabo as well, but instead of materializing in the pages of a book, these verses are able to circulate in the world as any other postcard would. They can be perceived as poetry, or (importantly) not. As such, they manage to materialize the coincidence of poetry and not-poetry, something that is a bit trickier for antipoems, which remain bound to the book. In her introduction to the 2004 *Antipoems: How to Look Better & Feel Great*, translator Liz Werner points out that "Parra does not only write antipoems, as the title of *Poemas y antipoemas* clearly tells us."²⁰ She suggests that, in thinking about "antipoetry," "antimatter" is a useful metaphor.²¹ "Viewed through the lens of antimatter, antipoetry mirrors poetry, not as its adversary but as its perfect complement; it is not by nature negative, but negative where poetry is positive and vice

18. Endecasílabo is a poetic form consisting of eleven syllables per line that traces its origins to Greek and Roman poetry, notably that of Catullus. In the middle ages, the form was adopted into Spanish from Italian and used in the *poesía culta* (learned or cultured poetry) of the time. Parra's adoption of the form emphasizes firm ties with poetic tradition, despite, and alongside, the rupture he wished to initiate.

19. René de Costa, "Para Una Poética de La (Anti) Poesía," *Revista Chilena de Literatura* 32 (1988): 8.

20. Nicanor Parra, *Antipoems: How to Look Better & Feel Great* (New York: New Directions, 2004), x.

21. Antimatter is also an apt metaphor for Parra, a trained physicist who, in addition to his long career as a poet, taught physics for half a century.

versa.”²² The antipoetic project, then, is always about poetry itself—mirroring it, opposing it, challenging it—and it is fitting that it would make its material home the codex. The *Artefactos*, on the other hand, are both *about* the relationship between poetry and not-poetry, and a material constitution of that relationship itself.

Post-Huidobro

In constituting that relationship, the *Artefactos* represent a further realization of antipoetry’s aims and share its antagonisms with the poets of Chile’s recent past. Of these, Vicente Huidobro bore the brunt of antipoetry’s critique. From his early practices in “creationism” to his later vanguard experimentations, Huidobro favored poetic language that specifically marked its difference from the language of everyday speech. As he wrote in “Arte Poetica,” (Ars Poetica) “el poeta es un pequeño Dios” (The poet is a little god)²³ charged with creating a new and distinct world for poetry. The theory Huidobro deemed “creationism,” as he describes, “is a general aesthetic theory that [he] began to elaborate around 1912.”²⁴ According to him, “the creationist poem is comprised of created images, created situations, created concepts,”²⁵ which manifest poetically as surprising images invented for the poem alone that don’t (and shouldn’t) correspond to the natural world. An example he gives is the phrase “square horizon,” the title of his 1917 collection *Horizon Carré*. The phrase is creationist to Huidobro specifically because a square horizon is not something that could occur in the natural world—it belongs to, and helps to create, the world of the poem alone.

22. Ibid.

23. Vicente Huidobro, *The Selected Poetry of Vicente Huidobro* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 2-3. Translation by David M. Guss.

24. Vicente Huidobro, *Manifestos Manifest* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999), 40. Translation by Gilbert Alter-Gilbert.

25. Ibid., 45.

Later, though no longer explicitly “creationist,” his vanguard writing shared this interest in seeking a distinctly poetic language. This is something taken to its perhaps furthest degree at the end of 1931’s *Altazor*. A long poem in seven cantos, its final lines consist of what translator Eliot Weinberger, in his introduction to the book, calls “a language of pure sound.”²⁶

Lalalí

Io ia

i i i o

Ai a i ai a i i i i o ia²⁷

These lines are unlikely to be considered everyday speech. They are certainly rarefied and distinct from the conversational uses of language Parra advocated. Despite this, I would say that for *Altazor*, which depicts the interstellar fall of the lyrical “I” of the same name, it’s also not entirely unimaginable that this “pure sound” would, in fact, sound quite a lot like the kinds of noises a falling person might make on the way down.

Parra’s rejection of Huidobro is a longstanding given in accounts of antipoetry, but their difference is not as absolute as the prevailing narrative suggests, and is sometimes overstated. As Niall Binns points out, the two poets overlap in a number of ways. Among their shared concerns are an “intent to transform ossified language” and a dedication to poetic engagement with “the latest technological advances.”²⁸ What’s more, twenty some years before *Poemas y antipoemas*, Canto IV of *Altazor* included the line “aquí yace Vicente antipoeta y mago” (here lies Vicente antipoet and magician).²⁹ For the purposes of this essay, it’s also important to stress that both

26. Vicente Huidobro, *Altazor* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), xi.

27. Ibid. 150

28. Niall Binns, “Herencias Antipoéticas: Vicente Huidobro Y Nicanor Parra” *Nuevo Texto Crítico* IX (1996): 143.

29. Huidobro, *Altazor*, 94.

poets integrated visual materials into their poetry, though in notably different spheres. Huidobro, for example, exhibited his painted poems in Paris, whereas Parra's *Artefactos*, as postcards, suggest more modest and interpersonal means of making themselves visible in the world. In this way, though the two poets share interests and methods, Parra's poetics do oppose the kind of division between poetic and natural worlds that Huidobro, especially during his creationist period, insisted on.

Rather than there being two sets of language, one that belongs to poetry and one that belongs to the world outside it, for Parra's antipoetry, poetic language should sound like language that is overheard on the street, circulating in political or commercial slogans, or spoken among friends and strangers. This remains true even though, in his codex-bound collections, Parra makes this case *with* poetry. In his poem "Manifiesto," Parra specifically calls out Huidobro by condemning "la poesía de pequeño dios" (the poetry of a little god),³⁰ but Parra also writes in endecasílabo. He does this at the same time as he critiques the role of poet as a magical or special figure:

Que el poeta no es un alquimista
El poeta es un hombre como todos

(A poet is no alchemist
A poet is a man like all men)³¹

This might seem like a contradiction, but to return to the metaphor of antimatter, antipoetry *was* poetry, even as it was anti. And, even in endecasílabo, Parra plainly makes the case against a poetry that would seek to separate itself from other kinds of speech and speakers.

30. Parra, *Emergency Poems*, 118.

31. Parra, *Emergency Poems*, 112-113. Translation of "A poet is no..." by Miller Williams.

That said, the codex, in some manners, limits this poetry's potential to circulate in the ways non-poetic speech or text does. Though *Poemas y antipoemas* made a huge splash, and Parra's antipoetics, in general, sought to broaden the potential audience for poetry, the book's means of circulation suggest a readership that would be likely to coincide quite substantially, if not entirely, with the typical readers of poetry. The *Artefactos*, on the other hand, actively seek ways out of this bind, by bringing plain, accessible speech into what had become, prior to antipoetry's intervention, the domain of precious or rare "poetical" language, and inviting poetry out from between the pages of a book. Made not just to look like postcards, but to actually be postcards, these poems significantly reorient the possible modes by which poetry can circulate in the domain of everyday life. Combining their postcard form with antipoetry's already established program of closing the gaps between poetry and everyday life and speech allows the *Artefactos* new material avenues for making good on the promises of Parra's poetics.

Post-politics

Figure 2 Nicanor Parra, "Todo es poesía menos la poesía," *Artefactos*, 1972.

The artefacto in figure 2 is characteristic of the ways the collection combines Parra's antipoetic program with resources that help to materialize its message. The words spelled out, "todo es poesía menos la poesía" (everything is poetry except poetry) amount to a pared down, straightforward rendering of antipoetry's paradoxical message. Poetry is still on the table, this artefacto announces, but it will not consist of "poetry" this time. Read in context with his "Manifiesto," it becomes clear that the poetry excepted by this artefacto is "la poesía de gafas obscuras/La poesía de capa y espada/La poesía de sombrero alón" (The poetry of dark

glasses/The poetry of the cape and sword/The poetry of the plumed hat).³² These lines all reject a poetry divorced from the contemporary moment, one marked by romantic, anachronistic images like capes and swords whose ability, even, to see the world in front of it is obscured by dark glasses.

While this intertextual definition wouldn't necessarily be at hand for every reader of this artefacto, it's also not necessary for the successful communication of its message. Readers of this card are free to come up with their own definitions of poetry, which, whether Huidobro's rarefied language, the clichéd swans of *modernismo*, or European poems learned in school, are all likely to share considerable distance from the language of readers' lived experiences. On the other hand, the images that appear visually in this artefacto function as ready examples for what might count as poetry, now. Their randomness proposes, as the words do, that poetry really could be anything, from bicycle wheels, to handcuffs, to pencil sharpeners. There are also some notable things missing—for example, there's nothing here that marks poetry as belonging to the privileged classes. On the contrary, the appearance of the butler figure in the "T" of "TODO" suggests that poetry is constituted by the *server* rather than the served. While the Victorian looking lady faces that contribute to the D might make the opposite suggestion, their disembodiment also implies considerable destruction of the values of refinement and chastity associated with both this feminine type and the poetry antipoetry antagonized.

Challenges to sexual propriety are even more strongly pronounced elsewhere in the collection. Like the nudie postcards known as "postales francesas" (French postcards),³³ the *Artefactos* are replete with sexual imagery in both their illustrations and text. According to

32. Ibid., 114-115.

33. So called because France produced many of these postcards in the early days of their circulation in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century.

Samuel León Cáceres et al, in Chile, “the female nude found a way into the market thanks to the postcard.”³⁴ The presence of male and female nudity in the *Artefactos* is thus both an appropriation of already circulating postcard types and a poetic provocation that challenges conservative sexual politics in both art and life. Like other of the *Artefactos*’ politics, though, there are lots of conflicting messages to be drawn from the sexually provocative poems, many of which represent not just a shock-the-bourgeois ethos common to artistic vanguards in general, but depict problematic racial and sexual politics. There are cards that uphold, for example, the sexual fetishization of mixed race women or announce, in type set between an illustration of two legs spread open, that for poetry to live “hay/que/poseerla/y humillarla en público” (you/have/to possess ‘her’/and humiliate ‘her’ in public). Though certainly likely to upset a politics of sexual prudence, these cards do nothing to destabilize existing racial or sexual power structures.

There are cards that can be interpreted more progressively, though. The artefacto in figure 3, which shows a co-ed exposing her rear, can be translated as “freshman woman/it doesn’t matter that you’re/not a virgin/the movement needs you,” positing that a woman’s worth is not tied to the maintenance of her sexual purity, and, too, that she has value as a political actor.

Figure 3 Nicanor Parra, "Compañera mechona/no importa que no/seas virgen/el movimiento te necesita," *Artefactos*, 1972.

Of course, this card can also be interpreted in the opposite direction, coercively suggesting that a woman’s worth to the movement lies precisely in the relinquishment of her sexual agency.

34. Cáceres et al., *Historia de La Postal En Chile*, 20.

This and other kinds of political ambiguity are common to the *Artefactos* that combine sex and politics. Another card depicts two line drawings, one of two individuals shooting crude guns at each other, and a second of two nude individuals entangled in a sexual encounter. Combined with these images are captions in a simple sans-serif font that read (in English) “Fighting for peace” and “Fucking for chastity.” Here, sex and politics are combined but, this time, with little specificity or connection to politics as it is practiced. An ironic denunciation of hypocrisy of all kinds, more than sex or politics in themselves, is the ultimate take-away of this artefacto.

What Gabriel Villaroel has referred to as the *Artefactos*’ “infinite irony”³⁵ is on display in this example, like almost all of the cards in the collection. This feature has provoked some frustration on the part of its readers, especially in the domain of politics, where the *Artefactos*’ irony sometimes functions to undermine clear political convictions. As many scholars have noted, the *Artefactos* don’t fit neatly into any single ideological camp. For instance, one, in large letters, reads “MAO.” An image of Mao appears in the “O.” Beneath his name, in smaller type is printed “Deja que abran las cien flores” (let a hundred flowers bloom), and beneath that, it reads “—No: con 99 basta y sobra” (‘No: 99 is more than enough’).” Quoting Mao, the poem refers to the Hundred Flowers Campaign in China during which time the communist party encouraged (and then later forcibly discouraged) open expression among its citizens. With ““99 is more than enough”” (Parra’s addition to the original quote) this *Artefacto* uses humor to reference both the opening of the regime and the violent crackdown that followed. As a result, readers might take from this a criticism of communism more generally. Other cards, though, appear to propose the

35. Gabriel Villaroel, “Ironía y descentramiento en los Artefactos de Nicanor Parra y Guillermo Tejada,” *Hallazgos* 11 (2014): 115.

opposite. For example one says, in the poet's own writing, "Queman esa bandera chilena/Mucho mejor una hoz y un martillo" (Burn that Chilean flag/Better a hammer and sickle).

In addition, there are many artefactos where political confusion is itself the message. Included among these examples would be one that reads, in the poet's own hand, "Cuba si/Yankees también" (Cuba yes/Yankees too) or "L'etat c'est moi/La revolución cubana soy yo" (I am the state/I am the Cuban revolution). Both of these play with political slogans and their approximations, another common feature of the *Artefactos*' found or prefab poetics. The first inverts the slogan "Cuba yes, Yankees no" with a kind of political double speech in which both are the favored. The second employs two expressions that sound almost identical on their own. The French is a quote attributed to Louis XIV, taken to represent how the power of governance is concentrated in the monarchical leader alone. Below that, in Spanish, is a phrase that, given the context of the Cuban revolution, would indicate an entirely different "yo" (I) to mean, as a result, that any given "I" can embody the revolution, the exact opposite of what would be possible in a monarchical form of government.

Van Hooft takes this political and subjective confusion to be evidence of Parra's role as a "compiler" more than an author of these poems, which don't just use everyday language but borrow from and tinker with language already circulating in the public sphere.³⁶ I take Parra's role in the *Artefactos* to be an even more radical unraveling of authorial control. Compile as he may, in formulating this process, as the postcards and their conditions of production show, Parra is just one compiler among many who actually or potentially contribute to the creation of these poems. Their visual artist, Tejeda, played at least as important of a role in the compilation of the *Artefactos*. In adding images to Parra's text, he first compiled textual and visual regimes within

36. Van Hooft, "The 'Artefactos' of Nicanor Parra," 70.

the postcards. Within the illustrations themselves, Tejeda frequently incorporated juxtaposition and collage, strategies that are, themselves, compilations. That the postcards are meant to be—or at least, in their paratextual makeup, suggest they might be—scribbled, addressed and mailed, further underscores the potential future intervention of additional compilers. What’s more, these compilers need not already have established themselves as authors (visual or textual) in order to contribute meaningfully to *Artefactos*’ final “editions.”

This is also why the confusion of allegiances expressed in the *Artefactos*, together, is not necessarily representative of political confusion on the part of Parra. It is true that the poet never declared his belonging to any given party, although, as Iván Carrasco describes it, “Parra lived through the most significant, conflict-ridden, and tense political moments in the history of modern Chile.”³⁷ Unlike many other poets at the time, Parra maintained what he has called an “open, but never sectarian leftism.”³⁸ This is also apparent in the *Artefactos*, which are political, but unpartied. The *Artefactos*’ politics is one of generalized irreverence and rejection of authorities of all kinds, something Carrasco describes as approximate to “the rebelliousness of anarchism.”³⁹ Despite this proximity to leftist politics in general, Parra has been criticized by both the left and the right. The collaborative making of the *Artefactos* themselves, which took place just prior to the US-backed military junta that installed Augusto Pinochet, was described by Tejeda as “a mark of the improvisatory and carnivalesque environment of *Allendismo* fighting with anti-*Allendismo* and vice versa.”⁴⁰ Ultimately, this is in part the reason why some of the postcards do not contain Tejeda’s illustrations, but only reproductions of Parra’s handwriting.

37. Iván Carrasco Muñoz, “La antipoesía: Manifestación política heterogénea,” *Atenea* 510 (2014): 96.

38. Piña, *Conversaciones Con La Poesía Chilena*, 117.

39. Muñoz, “La Antipoesía: Manifestación Política Heterogénea,” 97.

40. Cited in Parra, *Obras Completas & Algo +*, 985.

Because of the atmosphere at the time, the young artist began to grow nervous about the “ironic provocations that Parra was making toward the left and right alike.”⁴¹

Equally provocative is not the same as politically neutral, and Parra has insisted that his work “acts in the public sphere and is engaged with history, ideas, and problems.”⁴² After the coup, the military took over the Universidad Católica and Parra recounts how the new chancellor, Admiral Jorge Swett, “took out a box of the *Artefactos*, placed them on the table, and said that one reason the coup took place was “so that this would never happen again.”⁴³ After that, the remaining stock was burned on his orders. Coinciding with this, there was a long period in which the left was extremely suspicious of Parra, after the poet accepted an invitation to have tea with First Lady Pat Nixon in the White House in 1970. Parra would later reflect that he had repaired relations with the left, but he would continue to describe his poetics as one which “hasn’t identified with any flag.” Rather, it’s an “invitation to a certain type of waltz, one of relativity and indeterminacy.”⁴⁴

Taken as a whole, the *Artefactos* carve out a space for this indeterminate dance to take place, but it is the case that many of the individual *Artefactos* do address contemporary (and historical) politics, in Chile and abroad. Just as postcards deliver news from elsewhere, many of the examples are drawn from outside the Chilean context. The United States appears a number of times and usually as a target of critique, as in the artefacto that reads “USA/donde la libertad/es una estatua” (USA/where freedom/is a statue), the ironic “Our Nixon thou art in heaven,” or, as in figure 4, “V-Day/the North American flag/flutterers triumphantly/in the middle of a polydimensional cemetery/packed with crosses, large, medium, and small.”

41. Ibid.

42. Piña, *Conversaciones Con La Poesía Chilena*, 49.

43. Ibid., 50.

44. Ibid.

Figure 4 Nicanor Parra, "V-Day/La bandera norteamericano/flamea triunfante/en medio de un cementerio polidimensional/abarroado de cruces grandes, medianas y chicas," *Artefactos*, 1972.

Though Parra is often painted as apolitical, the *Artefactos*, in fact, make many political statements. The card in figure 4, and others, for example, clearly criticizes the United States' history of violence, imperialism, and hypocrisy.

The *Artefactos* don't opt out of politics, but present a range of sometimes contradictory political critiques and statements. As such, the collection maintains a kind of poetic commons in which critique itself is a poetic practice. In this space, voices other than Parra's are enabled to play significant roles in the authoring of their own utterances—poetic and political. This comes about as much as a result of the cards' diverse political expressions as of their material construction as postcards which open the opportunity that other opinions beyond the many Parra and Tejeda already compiled might be recorded in these poems.

The postcards also make it possible for this poetry to circulate in the manners that politics and political speech does—on fliers, in the mail, in public and interpersonal exchanges of all kinds. Parra has commented on the inspiration he drew from the political graffiti students would scratch onto bathroom stalls. The artefacto that reads, in English "Death has no future," was lifted wholesale from one such example. Werner also describes how the *Artefactos* were "inspired by the contagious art of advertising"⁴⁵ and Parra remarks to Morales that the advertising slogan "Did you Maclean your teeth today?" is a perfect example of an artefacto.⁴⁶ Advertising shares a name with "propaganda" in Spanish and, like its political counterpart, makes use of the kind of sloganeering and text/image integration the *Artefactos* also employ. As

45. Parra, *Antipoems: How to Look Better & Feel Great*, xi.

46. Reproduced in Parra, *Obras Completas & Algo +*, 992.

Roman Jakobson famously pointed out in his reading of “I like Ike,”⁴⁷ political slogans rely on the poetic function. Commercial ones do too, as Parra points out. And, the *Artefactos*’ frequent use of succinct, slogan-style phrasing highlights this already extant convergence of propagandistic and poetic speech and then deliberately blurs the lines between the two. According to the *Artefactos*, poetry is everything and everywhere, and can be written by anyone. What’s more, it might already be in your mail, on your billboards, or, graffitied on your bathroom stalls.

Post-Author

A convergence of multiple voices is also an end result of many of the *Artefactos*. Though the US figures as an antagonist in a number of the poems, many of *Artefactos* are written in English, or combine English and Spanish. This is perhaps best on display in one that reads “Spanglish/Cierren la windowa/que parece que/va a reinar.” This card blends the two languages in the mode of Spanglish and can be read as “Close the window/it seems like/it’s going to rain.” Its joke hinges on the words “windowa” and “reinar.” “Windowa” is not a word in Spanish but a calque of the English word “window” (“ventana” in Spanish). “Reinar,” on the other hand, is a word in Spanish, but is a cognate of the English “to reign” and not its homophone “to rain” (“llover” in Spanish).

“Spanglish” differs from the US-antagonizing artefactos, which, for the most part, address state-level politics and the hypocritical national myths the US tells itself and others. Alternately, the “Spanglish” artefacto represents a more organic encounter between South and North America, and the speakers of Spanish and English. This postcard “travels” in both

47. Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics” in *Style in Language* ed. Thomas Albert Sebeok (New York: M.I.T. Press, 1960), 357.

directions. In this way, it represents the journeys of countless immigrants, particularly into North America, and the impact, in both directions, of their multilingual encounter. This artefacto also puts into practice Parra's investment in the poetry of everyday language. As "Spanglish" shows, this is not just a matter of poetry's inclusion of topics and themes previously considered unpoetic, but a matter of showing how language itself is responsive to the contexts of its speakers, and of providing an opportunity for poetry to demonstrate this responsiveness too.

This artefacto also reiterates the ways in which the *Artefactos*, taken as whole, work against the privileging of a single, authorial "I." Just as a multitude of political stances are expressed in the collection, a multiplicity of voices are enabled, or invited, to compose these poems. As postcards, the *Artefactos* always start out unfinished. They are always awaiting another writer who will add another message to the backside of each card. Their rejections of propriety and antagonizing of both right and left, together, are part of a more generalized rejection of authority, which extends even to their author.

Figure 5 Nicanor Parra, "El mundo es lo que es/y no lo que un hijo de puta llamado Einstein/dice que es," *Artefactos*, 1972.

In figure 5, Albert Einstein represents the rejected authority. This poem reads "The world is what it is/and not what a son of a bitch named Einstein/says it is." This artefacto takes Einstein's authority down a peg (or several) first, by calling him a son of a bitch, and second, by refusing to give him the final word on what the world is. It also implies that the authority to make this kind of determination might reside in any (or none) of us, radically leveling the playing field for all

potential authorities. Because Parra was also a physicist, the rejection staged by this poem returns to the poet's own author-ity. In the *Artefactos*, poetry is what it is, and not even what Parra might say it is.

Parra was not the first to reject the authority of a single, stable, and assured author-figure. Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" came out in 1967 and Michel Foucault delivered his lecture, "What is an Author?" in 1969. In addition to the poststructuralist undoing of traditional notions authorship, twentieth-century poetic vanguards throughout the Americas rejected the lyrical "I" that had previously provided the poem with the appearance of a unified authorial or speaking voice. In the *Artefactos*, this rejection splits the author into many distinct subjectivities, all equally getting their say. The poetic rejection the *Artefactos* stage of an authoritative form is coupled with a rejection of extra-poetic authorities of all kinds. Though this collection doesn't ultimately dismantle every aspect of authority or social privilege, in or outside of poetry, what might said to its credit, is that the *Artefactos* authorize a combination of contradictory perspectives, which prevent, as a matter of course, the dominance of any single one.

This is made especially possible thanks to their construction as postcards, a feature that enables this collection of poetry to find heretofore unavailable opportunities. Set loose from the codex, the *Artefactos*' heteroglossia is not just a feature of their diverse content, but a material fact. The already multiple authors—Parra and Tejeda—share in the making of these poems with countless other authors, including all speakers, sloganeers, copywriters, and bathroom stall scrawlers whose language Parra borrows, adapts, and claims for poetry. They also include all the inferred and potential authors who might fill in the backs of each of these postcards, finally finishing the job Parra, Tejeda, and their other invisible collaborators began. Figure 6 thematizes this gesture, with text that reads "Hello/Hello/let it be known that it's not me who's speaking."

Figure 6 Nicanor Parra, "Alo/Alo/conste que yo/no soy el que habla," *Artefactos*, 1972.

This text replaces the head of the figure pictured, such that the very voice of the not-speaker has no mouth from which to proceed. It comes as already-available language, emerging from an only partially embodied speaker.

Because readers are invited to fill in the back of the postcards, the *Artefactos*' first readers are also their potential writers. Villaroel argues that "dialogue with the reader is fundamental" for the *Artefactos*, and that the reader is the one who "interprets and unfolds their potential."⁴⁸ While the role of interpreter belongs to the reader in most conditions of reading, and certainly in the reading of poetry, Villaroel underscores the way the collection's constant ironizing leaves the reader with an unusually high degree of interpretation yet to be done. Dialogue with the reader is also something the *Artefactos* stage literally. With filled front faces and blank backs, each card is a conversation opened but not yet finished, and the reader's job is not just to interpret what's on the front of the card, but to compose its reverse. In this way, the postcards further enable the antipoetic aim of including non-poetic speech and writing in poetry. They make use of commonly circulating and found language, and they invite non-poets to partake of their authorship as much as, or more than, their already multiple authors.

The *Artefactos* thus profoundly shift the reading experience from a model in which the reader is the receiver of the author's message to a model in which the reader is able to actively participate as another such author. The result of this radical remodeling of the reading experience is a fundamental leveling of the two roles. Everyone is able to partake in the making of poetry. In

48. Villaroel, "Ironía y descentramiento," 117.

the *Artefactos*, the poets don't need to come down from Olympus; they were never up there to begin with.

This also means that the poems are able to incorporate not-poetry in an even more expansive way than they might if they were bound to the codex. Whatever aspirations Parra might have in borrowing and adapting pre-circulating language, the Duchampian gesture of then calling these texts poetry (or antipoetry) inevitably reinstates some of the old hierarchies. In the author's newly reanimated hands, what was once not-poetry now is, and not everyone has the power to incite this transformation. While it's true that the same thing can be said of the *Artefactos*, their construction as postcards is a way of overcoming this challenge, of first inviting non-poets to contribute to the text of these cards, and second, as a way of including their language wholesale. The *Artefactos* thus insist on the potential contributions of other speakers and writers and, as postcards, make it possible for the reader and the writer to come, literally, together. Correspondence from non-poet writers is able to circulate with poetry and poetry is able to circulate alongside this correspondence as part of the postcard. For the *Artefactos*, the postcard is not just an alternative to the book, but one that specifically makes the alternative possibilities Parra seeks for poetry materially possible. It melds the everyday with the poetic to such a degree that poetic language goes beyond approximating the language heard and seen in everyday life to ultimately embody that language itself.

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